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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

MCO

MEMORANDUM

The Situation in Vietnam

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127

18 February 1968

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Information as of 1600
18 February 1968
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HIGHLIGHTS

The Communists launched a new wave of offensive action against urban centers in South Vietnam the night of 17-18 February. The intensity of the attacks and casualties on both sides were much lighter than at Tet.

I. The Military Situation in South Vietnam:

Communists launch new wave of attacks on urban centers, with action lightest in the northern provinces (Paras. 1-4). The situation in the Saigon area is reported, along with predictions of new attacks (Paras. 5-9). The situations in the corps areas are reported (Paras. 10-20).

II. Political Developments in South Vietnam:

Thieu again voices reluctance to exercise forceful leadership (Paras. 1-3). Some progress made on formation of anti-Communist political front (Paras. 4-5). The government appears to have turned in creditable performance in the western highlands (Paras. 6-9). The picture in the delta is somewhat more gloomy (Paras. 10-11).

III. North Vietnamese Military Developments:

North Vietnamese aircraft again engaged in unusual air activity. Two IL-28s return from China and AN-2s fly south (Paras. 1-3). [redacted]

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IV. Other Communist Military Developments:

There is nothing of significance to report.

V. Communist Political Developments:

The Communist hierarchy in South Vietnam met on 11 and 12 February to review the situation and to prepare for continuing the offensive (Paras. 1-4). Communist propaganda continues to focus on the northern part of South Vietnam and to imply that the Communists are taking over administrative control of that part of the country (Paras. 5-9).

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I. THE MILITARY SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

1. In what appears to be the start of a second phase of their offensive against urban centers, the Communists on the night of 17-18 February launched widespread and coordinated mortar and rocket attacks, accompanied by scattered ground attacks, against more than 30 towns and airfields in South Vietnam.

2. The bulk of the attacks were centered in South Vietnam's III and IV Corps in the southern half of the country, with scattered actions throughout II Corps. I Corps has remained largely spared in the current round, although skirmishing has been reported along the coastal areas together with shelling in the Hue - Phu Bai area and against Khe Sanh. There continue to be strong indications of impending enemy offensive action in I Corps and possibly against additional provincial capitals along the central coast.

3. Heavy mortar and rocket fire has been directed against Tan Son Nhut Airfield serving Saigon, as well as against major allied headquarters and installations north of the capital, possibly in an effort to cover troop movements toward Saigon. Although there have been no ground attacks against Saigon, there has been shelling of police stations within the capital and sporadic sharp fighting in outlying areas to the north and south. There are ominous indications that the capital is in for further Communist military and political moves.

4. The current wave of attacks and resulting casualties on both sides so far appear lighter than at Tet. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] all provincial capitals and Saigon would be attacked at 2:00 A.M. on 18 February, nearly all areas were alerted against possible enemy action. Primary Communist reliance on heavy weapons fire in the latest assaults has tended to minimize losses to Communist forces and the chances of direct ground engagements.

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Saigon Area

5. Attacks in the capital area began at Tan Son Nhut Airfield shortly after midnight on 18 February, Saigon time. About 100 rounds of 82-mm. mortar and 122-mm. rocket fire--the first used of the latter weapon in the capital area--were directed against the field, resulting in four Americans killed and 92 wounded. Six aircraft were reported destroyed and 45 damaged. Some destruction of facilities on the base was reported. There was no ground follow-up against Tan Son Nhut, but several nearby positions including that of an ARVN airborne element received rocket fire.

6. In the central part of Saigon, approximately 20 rounds of mortar fire hit a police compound on 18 February, killing six and wounding 33. Fighting also occurred at points around the city, including a heavy attack against an ARVN training center north of the capital and a sharp battle some miles to the south. Major POL depots just south of the city and near Bien Hoa to the north received B-40 rocket fire, as did two ships unloading ammunition about five miles northeast of the capital. At last report, mortar attacks continued on 19 February against Tan Son Nhut and certain key targets in Saigon, including the National Police headquarters and a power plant.

7. There have been numerous reports from [REDACTED] low-level prisoners in recent days that additional large-scale attacks would be mounted against Saigon. Police Director Loan predicted new mortar, rocket, and ground attacks and believes that the enemy may commit two main force battalions against Tan Son Nhut, and that other forces may raid the city's southwestern precincts.

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8. There are some other indications of further action around the capital. A radio terminal serving the Viet Cong Military Region 4 headquarters was tentatively fixed in an area about four miles southwest of Cholon--the Chinese quarter of Saigon--on 17 February. This location would represent a move of 20 miles southward from the headquarters' last position on 15 February.

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9. Another radio terminal believed possibly to serve an element of COSVN--the senior Viet Cong military and political headquarters in the South--was also located by direction finding on 16 February at a point less than six miles east of Saigon, or some 95 miles from its normal base area. Finally, there is tenuous evidence that a terminal serving an unidentified military "Front" headquarters in Binh Long Province, near the Cambodian border, may have begun a southward deployment. This headquarters is believed to be a coordinating authority over the three enemy divisions in III Corps, all of which have been noted out of their normal operating areas and in positions closer to Saigon since the Tet offensive.

III Corps

10. In addition to the mortar attacks around Saigon, at least seven of the 11 provincial capitals in III Corps also received mortar attacks on the night of 17-18 February. Some ground follow up action was reported against three capitals, Song Be and Tay Ninh city north of Saigon and Bao Trai to the northwest. The Communists reportedly used 122-mm. rockets in the assaults on Song Be and Tay Ninh. Some 200 enemy troops may still be within the Song Be city limits although only sniper fire was noted at last report.

11. Simultaneously with the assaults elsewhere, several US military installations, including Bien Hoa Airfield and nearby headquarters of US brigades at Lai Khe, Cu Chi and Phu Loi, also received mortar or rocket fire. Scattered harassment was also reported against US advisory compounds in the capital of Binh Long Province as well as in areas east of Saigon. No major damage has been reported.

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IV Corps

12. Beginning about 1:00 A.M. on 18 February, coordinated mortar attacks were conducted on at least eight of the 16 provincial capitals in the delta and on a number of airfields and other military installations, including a US military headquarters near My Tho and major airfields around Can Tho. Ground attacks were launched against four cities, Vinh Long, Cao Lanh, My Tho and Ben Tre, but as in III Corps, the assaults appear to have been lighter than at Tet. The heaviest ground action seems to be at Vinh Long where air strikes have been called in against an estimated 700-800 enemy troops believed in the city.

13. There are unconfirmed reports of enemy concentrations in the vicinity of some provincial and district towns in the delta which have not yet been heavily attacked.

II Corps

14. Enemy action in II Corps has been somewhat scattered, with the major action against Phan Thiet on the coast and mortar harassment and ground probes in the highlands area. An enemy force estimated at two to three companies attacked Phan Thiet, temporarily seizing the town jail and freeing 500 prisoners. Although allied forces have regained control of the prison, fighting reportedly continues in part of the city. Casualties so far appear to have been light.

15. Elsewhere, Communist forces conducted a mortar attack on the Kontum Airfield and a ground attack on a nearby position. Similar harassment was reported at Da Lat where, in addition, about two companies of enemy troops reportedly attacked and entered the city. No late details are available. Farther south, the town of Gia Nghia, capital of Quang Duc Province, received mortar fire in the first enemy action reported in this province since the beginning of the year.

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16. Other major capitals in II Corps were not attacked during the weekend, but enemy concentrations are reported within striking range of both Nha Trang and Tuy Hoa on the central coast. No action has been reported in the Dak To area of Kontum Province

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I Corps

17. Allied forces and positions in northern Quang Tri Province, at Hue, and at the MACV Forward Headquarters at Phu Bai were struck by mortar, rocket, and artillery fire on 17-18 February, and Khe Sanh continues to come under daily mortar and artillery fire. In addition, sharp skirmishes have continued to occur at several points along the northern coastal region between Da Nang and the DMZ, but there have been no major outbreaks of new fighting in I Corps.

18. Communist forces in this region, however, remain deployed in positions threatening a number of major targets and could renew wide offensive activity with little warning. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] the 803rd North Vietnamese Regiment, which recently moved southward from the DMZ to the area of Quang Tri city, suggests that attacks may have been planned which have not yet been carried out. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Hanoi had ordered a general offensive in the northern half of South Vietnam to begin in the early morning hours of 18 February--

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[REDACTED] The order in the northern provinces, however, reportedly arrived late, forcing a delay in the offensive.

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19. [redacted] in Da Nang [redacted]

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[redacted] a new plan of attack on the city has been worked out, based on an assessment of failures in the initial attack at Tet. No clear date for the attack was specified [redacted]

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however, a further effort will be made to seize the city employing more thorough coordination between assets within the city and attacking forces from the outside, including major elements of the North Vietnamese 2nd Division. Demonstrators would also be brought in from nearby villages. If the attack fails, [redacted] the Communists will hope at a minimum to occupy surrounding villages as "stepping stones" to later attacks.

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20. In addition to the shelling of the southern half of the city of Hue, Communist action includes continued resistance by remnants within the Citadel area to allied forces clearing the northern half. Some evidence of the importance of Hue in Communist plans continues to be derived from tenuous indications that one of the three regiments of the North Vietnamese 324B Division, which has been moving toward Quang Tri city, may be deploying toward Hue. A forward element of the Tri-Thien-Hue headquarters, which controls enemy operations in southern Quang Tri and all of Thua Thien Province, has also been tentatively located [redacted] in the Hue Citadel area.

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II. POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

1. President Thieu has again voiced his reluctance to exercise more forceful leadership.

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Anti-Communist Front

4. A small step forward in the effort to form a broadly based anti-Communist front occurred on 18 February, when a large number of veteran politicians and one-time military figures of widely varying political hues, participated in a Saigon conference dubbed the "Peoples Congress to Save the Nation." A number of national assemblymen were present, but apparently no members of the government's executive department or figures closely associated with President Thieu attended.

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5. The meeting was characterized by an uncommon sense of urgency and commitment to the nation which held expressions of political differences and carping at the current performance of the Thieu government to a minimum. A number of speakers underlined the critical need for unity in the face of the growing Communist threat, and extolled the virtue of submerging political "prejudices," so that a unified bloc could be formed to aid the government's fight against the Communists. Aside from the rhetorical flourishes, the "Congress" took the practical step of electing a standing committee to begin organizing a nongovernment anti-Communist front.

US Official Assesses Political Situation in Western Highlands

6. The government appears to have turned in a creditable performance in reaction to the Communists Tet offensive in the western highlands.

7. According to a US official who recently visited Kontum, Pleiku, and Ban Me Thuot towns, morale is high, and there is new-found confidence in the ARVN's ability to defend the towns successfully should there be new onslaughts. Among those who praised the forceful and effective response to the Viet Cong attacks and the relief work which is now in full swing were persons who in the past had been critical of the government's military and administrative performance in the highlands.

8. The US official also observed that there does not appear to be any popular resentment over the fact that much of the considerable destruction in the towns--more than 20 percent of Ban Me Thuot has been completely burned to the ground, for example--was caused by allied fire power. He believes that the civilian population is, for the most part, taking a philosophical attitude toward the devastation, ascribing losses to the unpleasant realities of war.

9. Although there may be a "small minority" more critical of the government's effort, many local

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leaders are eagerly pitching in and helping with the government's relief program, and the Viet Cong failed to generate any substantial popular support for their effort. The US official also notes, however, that his assessment pertains only to the situation in the towns. Access to the countryside is still extremely limited and reliable reports on the situation there have not yet filtered in.

Aftermath of Tet Offensive in Delta

9. A somewhat more somber picture has been painted by a US official based at Can Tho city in the delta. He reports that the destruction of Can Tho university's only permanent building during the Tet fighting has left ill-will toward the government, and by implication the US, which will probably prove difficult to erase.

10. He asserts that popular resentment has been fanned by the fact that Can Tho university is the only one located in the delta, and as such has been a source of pride and hope beyond the immediate confines of Can Tho. The opinion is widely held that the virtual destruction of the university by government air and artillery strikes was not justified by the small number of Viet Cong who were holed-up in its science-library building.

11. The lackluster performance of government troops during the delta attack as well as widespread ARVN looting has also contributed heavily to popular disaffection. In addition, relations between US advisers in the delta and government military and civilian officials apparently have suffered badly as a result of ex post facto recriminations, particularly charges by some ARVN officers that US military support was intentionally kept insufficient in the early fighting.

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III. NORTH VIETNAMESE MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

1. [redacted] North Vietnamese aircraft are again engaged in unusual activity, possibly associated with support to Communist forces in the northern part of South Vietnam.

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2. [redacted] two North Vietnamese IL-28 jet light bombers returned to Phuc Yen Airfield from Communist China on the evening of 18 February. Three IL-28s flew from China to Phuc Yen in early February, but were never used in attack missions. One of these was damaged by US air strikes, but the other two returned to China last week. IL-28s operating from North Vietnam would pose a limited air threat to allied forces in South Vietnam and to US naval ships in the Gulf of Tonkin.

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3. In addition, four North Vietnamese AN-2 single-engine transports took off from Hanoi - Gia Lam airfield on the night of 17 February for an unidentified mission in the southern DRV. [redacted] they may have been headed for the Demilitarized Zone area. North Vietnamese transports earlier this month performed what appeared to be paradrop operations in the northwestern sector of South Vietnam and the adjacent area of Laos.

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Unusual Activity by North Vietnamese Airborne Unit

4. There are some tentative indications that elements from North Vietnam's only airborne unit are involved, or are preparing to become involved, in current military activities. [redacted]

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5. There is no other evidence bearing on the activities of the 305th or its three battalions. Some

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or all of these units could be involved with the unusual DRV air transport activities of the past few weeks, including paradrop operations in the Laos/DMZ area.

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IV. OTHER COMMUNIST MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

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V. COMMUNIST POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

1. Vietnamese Communist propaganda has again taken on a more strident tone in support of the new wave of coordinated attacks in the South.

Vietnamese Communists Hold Meeting

2. A meeting of top members of the Communist military and political hierarchy in South Vietnam was held on 11 and 12 February, according to a Viet Cong radio announcement on 17 February. The meeting doubtless was convened to review the over-all Communist situation in the wake of the first part of the Tet offensive, and probably was used to pass on Hanoi's instructions for the coming weeks. A similar meeting was held in mid-January in which final instructions for the countrywide assaults launched at the end of the month presumably were given to high-ranking leaders. The recent meeting probably covered some of the decisions leading up to the present resurgence of Communist military activity.

3. A full text of the communiqué published by this so-called "extraordinary enlarged session" of the Liberation Front's central committee is not yet available, but it is unlikely to disclose much of substance anyway. A preliminary report says the conference reviewed the situation since the beginning of the "current general offensive" and discussed the tasks for the immediate future.

4. A Hanoi broadcast summarizing the communiqué indicates it contained the usual glowing Communist description of the results of the Tet offensive, which it claimed had created conditions favorable for achieving final victory.

Communists Focus Attention on Northern South Vietnam

5. Despite the relative lull in new fighting so far in the northern part of South Vietnam, Vietnamese Communist propaganda continues to zero in on

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that area in particular. Recent Viet Cong and Hanoi broadcasts strongly imply that new military attacks will be accompanied by efforts to take over administrative control of wide areas in that part of the country.

6. The North Vietnamese party daily on 18 February carried an editorial praising "initial victories" in the current "general offensive and simultaneous uprisings" in central Vietnam (most of I and II Corps). It claimed that Communist forces have "turned the military and political tide" there and quoted a communiqué from the Communist command in that region saying that "vast rural areas" had been "liberated" and GVN control had been broken in a "string" of provincial capitals and towns. According to the paper, this put the Communists in a position to "overwhelm the enemy in many areas," and it promised even bigger and more resounding victories in the future.

7. Similarly, Hanoi came down hard on 18 February with an endorsement of the establishment of a new "People's Revolutionary Committee" of Thua Thien Province and Hue city, which was announced by the Viet Cong radio last week. The announcement claimed this committee was in process of taking over the administration of Thua Thien and Hue, and that GVN authority had been "liquidated" or was disintegrating. The new "provisional administration" allegedly has been set up under the auspices of the Hue city "National, Democratic, and Peace Alliance," a front group unveiled by the Communists at the opening of the Tet offensive. Le Van Hao, who was surfaced earlier as head of the Hue "alliance," was also said to be chief of the new "revolutionary committee."

8. Hanoi said the committee had decided to "wipe out" the South Vietnamese administration structure "at all levels," and to "recognize" new revolutionary committees allegedly being set up throughout the Thua Thien Province.

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9. Much of this doubtless is sheer propaganda designed to buttress Communist claims that "revolutionary elements" from all parts of South Vietnamese society are rising up to topple the Thieu-Ky regime. The persistence of the claims, however, and their continued evolution in the Thua Thien - Hue area suggests the Communists are determined to establish some sort of new political structure in this region through political agitation and organizational efforts now being conducted in both urban and rural areas.

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